

Janet was checking out another customer as Markus walked over to her after talking with Gal'Brek. Though as he noticed just who she was helping, Markus waited to approach her. Joshua appeared to be buying something and far be it from Markus to stir up trouble when there didn't need to be any. Isabella noticed how he waited in approaching Janet and looked up to him.

"Daddy? What's wrong?"

"Nothing darling, just letting other folks do their business." He told her keeping his voice down so as not to alert the Hobgoblin to his presence wanting to avoid a confrontation.

As if to spite him and his attempts to remain quiet and out of the way. The hobgoblin lieutenant seemed to over hear him and looked in his direction.

"Hey dumb ass!" He shouted.

With a sigh Markus looked up from Isabella and over to Joshua. "Hello Joshua."

"What the hell are you doing out here? Aren't you supposed to be doing something? Or did you forget you said you'd be talking to the boss?" The Hobgoblin questioned him, the tone of his voice seemed to indicate restrained disdain.

Janet seeing the two clearly appeared at odds. Continued to do her job and check out Joshua's items quietly so as not to get caught in the middle of the exchange.

"I fully intend to speak with them. I just made a stop here to talk to an old friend of mine and introduce them to my daughter. Or am I not allowed to talk to people I know?"

The hobgoblin appeared to get agitated, but also calmed themselves down as they seemed to quietly speak to themselves.

"Daddy, please be nice." Isabella interjected, surprising both men. Markus looked to her with surprise, as she looked up to him with a look of seriousness one could expect from a child. Joshua surprised to see that the others own child seemed to be chiding her father.

"Hah, your kid has a good head on her shoulders." The Hobgoblin smirked.

Markus looked from Isabella back to Joshua and gave an exasperated sigh. Not because of Isabella, but because he had been trying to avoid confrontation and had in only a few exchange of words with Joshua. Had been working up to a confrontation.

"I will work on it dear." He told her as he looked down to her and squeezed her hand before he walked over to Joshua. Intending not to fight the hobgoblin and tempering his own presumption that simply talking with the hobgoblin would lead to an argument. "What brings you out here Joshua? If you do not mind me be nosey this once."

“Hmph, this is a hell of a different side of you than usual.” They remarked tensing up as Markus approached them but they soon relaxed as it became apparent Markus was also remaining calm. “And getting food for the family.”

“Ah, I did not know.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. Why would I tell you?”

Markus bit his tongue, but Joshua had no reason to previously tell him about any family they had. “How is your boss? They doing okay?”

“She’s doing fine. Just having to keep my brothers in line. You know how it is with goblinoid families.” Joshua shrugged.

“Not really, but I got the impression that your boss was good at keeping people close to her in check.”

“And those whom she worked with, even more in check, yeah. She’s still the same. But my brothers are getting rowdier as she gets older.”

“And it’s becoming challenging to keep them in check?”

“I didn’t say that. I would never say that.”

But that was what was being hinted towards. Markus figured from the talk. Which meant some serious shaking up was happening or about to happen.

“I told her you would be stopping by. That got seemed to clear up her mood somewhat.”

Markus nodded his head.

“I also told her you had a kid now.”

“What?!”

Joshua shrugged nonchalantly. “She asked what you had been doing when I saw you and I told her you were walking your kid around. Or would you rather I not tell her you have your own kid now?”

Markus felt his blood pressure rise as the Hobgoblin had told someone else about his daughter. But he shook his head, not at Joshua, it was a good thing she learned early enough. It might take some pressure off of him. It clearly seemed to have tempered Joshua somewhat.

“No, no, I just did not think you would tell her. And I wanted to tell her myself.”

“Well sorry to ruin your surprise. But she also said the same thing I told you. If you want to work off your debt to her. You are welcome to come by but leave your kid at home. We’ve got nothing but trouble and there is no way in hell she would ever forgive you for involving your girl in your shit.”

Markus smiled and nodded his head in agreement. “Well, at least we are all on the same page with that sentiment at least.”

“Daddy?”

“Don’t worry darling. I just don’t want you to be in danger or get involved in things that will harm you because of my decisions.” He said calmly giving her hand a squeeze.

“Ahem, excuse me. But your items have been rung up. Will that be all for you?” Janet spoke up getting Joshua’s attention.

“Yeah, that’s it. Thanks.” The mafia lieutenant said and swiped a card through the pay scanner.

“Thank you, have a pleasant day.” The pleasant Youko replied with a smile.

“You too, oh and if this jerk gives you trouble. Just let me know I’ll knock some sense into his thick skull for ya.”

Janet smiled and nodded her head. “Thank you for the offer. But I was hoping to ask him to take care of something for the store.”

“What would that be?” Joshua asked intrigued as the Youko spoke also gaining Markus’s attention.

“Well, since you two seem to be acquaintances. You see, there’s a group of pushers who’ve taken to selling on the corner recently. Nothing serious mind you. But they’ve become rather pushy and have started to spook some of our less confrontational customers away.”

“And you wanted to ask if I... we could deal with them?” Markus asked shooting Joshua a side long glance.

The fox woman smiled and nodded her head, yes in agreement. “I would rather things not come to blows. But if you could convince them to sell somewhere else. It would help our store immensely.”

Markus paused to think about it. Did he really want to get involved in dealing with small time drug sellers? And possibly getting caught up in something more?

“Sure, we’ll help.” Joshua said without hesitation. Catching Markus off guard.

“What?”

“You heard me or are you going to prove to be unreliable? All you need to do is act menacing. Let me do the talking. Act like the hired muscle and keep your trap shut. They likely know me and will shit themselves and run away with their tails between their legs. Pushers always do so when they see one of us coming. Or if they think their in the boss’s territory.”

“That,” Markus had to pause and consider it. What he was suggesting made sense and it was more likely to work with two of them instead of the two of them. And if they knew anything about the local mafia’s then a fight would be the last thing any pusher would want. “would actually work.”

“Just leave your girl here. I’m sure the kind cashier here wouldn’t mind looking over her?”

“Not at all!” Janet said with a smile.

“Isabella?” Markus asked looking down to his daughter.

“Yes daddy?”

“Do you mind staying by Ms. Janet’s side and helping her with some items while daddy steps outside with his acquaintance and have a... talk. With a couple of fellows?”

She paused to look between the two men who towered above her and how they seemed to be working together instead of being about to fight each other. This made her smile and she nodded her head happily. “Okay.” She said and let go of her fathers hand as he let go of hers so she could stay behind the counter beside Janet.

“Good girl, we’ll be right back.” He told her and looked back to Joshua who nodded his head in agreement.

“Come on then, lets take care of these idiots.” The Hobgoblin said heading out clearly expecting Markus to follow him.

Markus nodded his head in assent and followed beside him, giving Isabella a parting smile. The small lamia looking over the counter to him as he left with the lieutenant.

Together the two of them looked to be an uncanny pair. And personally, Markus never would have expected to be working with the hobgoblin. Yet, it was Joshua who had been the first to accept such an idea. Maybe he had been quick to judge the hobgoblin in their early interactions? His brothers certainly didn’t help paint a good image.

And inwardly he winced, realizing what happened. But what was done was done. Only way to fix things was to push forward and make things right. And one of the best ways to right past wrongs, was to work together.

It did not take long to find the so called 'pushers'. A group of delinquents who had to be no older than eighteen at the oldest and sixteen at the youngest. Likely part of a local gang which was part of a larger criminal organization. Something Markus was intimately familiar with from his own younger years. Though he never pushed drugs on a street corner.

A quick analysis of the scene told Markus that there were two pushers and three acting as backup or muscle to help protect the pushers or help menace people into either buying or leaving the pushers alone. All of them human, like himself. A common enough setup. One which either he could handle on his own, yet he had yet to see Joshua act on his own without backup from at least a dozen goblins acting as his back up. So seeing the hobgoblin taking charge and acting on his own with only himself as assistance, would be an interesting sight.

"Hey, you lot," Joshua started as he approached the two pushers. Gaining their immediate attention as well as their back up. Markus stayed close by but gave him space to talk. Letting Joshua be the clear and obvious person in charge.

"What do you want old fart?" Called back one of the pushers. "You and your boyfriend looking for a hit?"

"Fuck no, what I want is to know why you idiots are pushing your shit here. Rather than in what ever slum you come from."

That got a reaction from the groups backup as the three other boys joined the pushers side.

"What's it to you red skin? Not like this is anyone's territory. It's free real estate as far as anyone who actually matters cares." Spoke up a second, who was of the back up who took a step forward he was the oldest and likely the leader of the group.

"Oh really? And who actually matters then?"

"No one you and your boyfriend would know about you ruddy hobgoblin. Now how about you push off yourself. Before we beat the shit out of you." The eldest of the five threatened.

"You fuckers have no idea who you are talking to do you?" Joshua tsked shaking his head. "Well let me enlighten you. And spare you having to tell your boss why you started a turf war with the fucking mafia. I am Lieutenant of the Ogroid Mafia and I've dealt with young up starts like yourself since I could walk."

As he said this the eldest of the group paused as to consider Joshua's words. Though the younger members of the group didn't seem phased or didn't understand the danger they were in. As one of them tried to step in front of their groups leader.

"Like fuck you are. Why would you be with a human then? You ass hats only role with Goblins, Hobgoblin's and Ogre's." Challenged the youngest of the group. Speaking up before the leader of their group could stop them.

“This guy? He owes us a debt. I’m making him pay up by helping me clean the streets of little shits like yourself.”

“Since when does the Mafia give a shit about the streets being clean?” Asked the leader finding his voice. Though being cautious.

“Since now. Since you’ve decided to move in on turf that’s still being discussed by people with more brains in their head and muscle on their body than you currently have in your little posse. So I say again. Piss off, unless you want to explain to your boss why you started a war with the Mafia. This is your last warning before me and my associate beat some sense into you and make you crawl back to whatever hole you crawled out of.”

That was Markus’s cue to step closer, rolling his shoulders. Cracking his neck and knuckles. He knew he didn’t look like much normally. But so long as he looked bigger and more intimidating then hopefully the kids in front of them would get the idea that a fight was not in their best interest.

For a moment things looked like they would break down into a fight as the younger kid in front looked to be raising a fist. Looking to strike the first blow. But then the eldest of the group whistled sharply to get their attention and those of the rest of his group. “Listen up, we’re moving out early today. The boss was clear, if any of the big names makes a move, we’re to pull back. Not to look for a fight.”

“But there’s only two of them! We can take them both!” Shouted one of the other boys in the group.

“Oh, really? You think there is only two of them? Holy shit I am babysitting. Listen, the Ogroid Mafia never rolls with anything less than ten men. Oh, sure there is one in front of us and a debtor. But can you see the other nine?”

“N... no?”

Joshua smiled and nodded his head. “Someone’s got a head on their shoulders. What’s your name?” Joshua asked the leader of the group.

“Jason, and you must be Joshua. Because if you were any of your brothers you wouldn’t have bothered talking to us.”

“Ah, it seems my brothers reputation precedes even myself.” The boys in front of them might not have noticed it, but Markus noticed how Joshua seemed to be annoyed that his brothers own history for violence seemed to be more recognizable thing than his own willingness to talk.

“Good to see someone else out there using their head. Listen, Jason, you keep that head of yours on your shoulders and don’t ever stop using it. You’ll get further ahead using your brain than you will using your fists. But don’t stop fighting as well.”

The eldest teen didn't say anything more to Joshua. But he nodded his head in acknowledgement to his words. "Alright you lot, we're moving out and reporting back to the boss. I'm sure he'd like to know that the Mafia is making moves."

There was some complaint from the group of boys, but they all fell in line as the leader of their group began rounding them up and ushering them away. Meaning any who stayed behind would be without support. And thus be unable to stand up to Joshua and Markus.

In a few short minutes with only a little bit of dialogue and sharpened words being exchanged. The drug dealers left with out a fuss. When the boys rounded the corner and left. Joshua let out a sigh and looked to Markus.

"So, 'associate' shall we go collect your daughter and my groceries and go our separate ways?"

"I feel like that would be a good plan, associate." Markus said with a nod of agreement.

"Good, because I really did not want to have to deal with those brats. And have to explain to the boss why I felt the need to beat up a couple of kids. And call in on a debt I'm not owed."

"But you did technically use some of that debt as leverage."

"Fuck you, you're an ass hole."

Markus shrugged his shoulder and turned around to head back to the grocery store. Same with Joshua, but they both paused and this time it was Markus's turn to sigh. But more out of frustration.

"Hey bro, what are you doing out with that fucking Downer and those brats? Trying to recruit more help?" Asked an almost identical copy to Joshua as two more hobgoblins stood opposite of Markus and Joshua.

"Murdok, Merdok" As Joshua greeted his brothers, Markus noted how Joshua's fists tightened and how his body posture was quickly on the offensive.

Joshua was not alone in the change of body posture or preparedness. Markus had had enough experience dealing with these two brothers to know that any interaction with them usually meant a fight was soon to follow.

"And no, I'm doing a bit of good will and outreach. Trying to establish connections, rather than looking for a fight in every god damn corner I look."

Markus continued to remain silent. But he did not relent in his posture, where before he wanted to look intimidating to the group of teens. Now he was intending to look as if he was ready to defend himself. As he shifted his posture around. Legs moving into a stance more comfortable to that of someone expecting a fight. He loosened his muscles and readied himself in the expectation of a fight.

“So being a cock sucking coward then?”

Joshua’s lip twitched upwards as the other brother spoke clearly intending to upset him. Markus could see as Joshua was gearing up for a row.

“I thought fighting between family was forbidden?” Markus spoke up gaining the other two’s attention and drawing their focus off Joshua.

“We’re not looking to fight him.” That was Murdok

“Nah, we’re just looking to bust your face in for owing our boss money, downer. Unless you suddenly got the money to pay us off?” And that was Merdok.

“Not a cent to my name.”

“Then we’re gonna beat you to a bloody fucking pulp!”

Markus looked to the side to Joshua. The other Hobgoblin, didn’t break his own gaze on his brothers. Markus never counted Joshua to be a friend. But he knew he could count on his sense of right and wrong for certain situations. And with his brothers threatening his ‘associate’ then Joshua would likely be compelled to assist Markus. Though to how much, would depend on how much he would push the envelop on not fighting between family.

Markus looked back to the two hobgoblin brothers in front of him. Despite the boy’s earlier proclamation of just how many people from their clan normally traveled together.

These two expressly never had any additional backup beyond each other. Though Joshua traveling alone today was an oddity, Markus chalked it up to him being on unofficial business unrelated to the organization so he likely wouldn’t bother with getting additional backup.

“I take it a fight is unavoidable?” Markus asked looking to the grocery store where his daughter was at and who was likely watching him.

“Not unless you pay up, downer.”

“Then I’ll make this lesson, number forty-two. In the hopes you truly learn this lesson in life.” Markus said raising his fists in waiting for them to make the first move.

The two brothers didn’t waste a second more. Drawing out large clubs from their sides. One charging straight at Markus the other moving to circle around him. This song and dance again, Markus thought to himself. As he stepped away from Joshua giving space for himself and a chance for Joshua to leave if he so wished.

Murdok who had charged forward swung his club at Markus’s head, swinging from left to right. An attack, clear as day. Markus under attack by the brutish hobgoblin moved to duck down, by

tucking himself in to his waist, while also retaliating in kind. With a strong upper cut from his right hand. Twisting his waist from ducking down and pushing himself and his fist forward. Aiming to land a blow into the hobgoblins chest.

But as he moved to dodge and throw his own punch. Markus did not lose track of the other brother, Merdok. Whom was just moving to get around Joshua, ignoring him. So he could likely hit Markus from behind. But as the other brutish hobgoblin tried to get around his brother. Joshua tripped him up using a simple trick of sticking out his foot. Causing the bruiser of a hobgoblin to come tumbling down on to the pavement.

Murdock's swing whooshed over Markus's head. Rustling his hair at just how narrowly Markus had avoided being bloodied by the crude yet effective weapon. But just as the club had missed his head, Markus fist upon impacting the hobgoblin's chest hit the hardened muscle of the goblin-oid. So while Markus had indeed landed a hit, the hobgoblin in front of him felt very little of the impact.

So Markus had to go on the offensive. Bringing his left fist around and aiming for the brothers face. Rotating his shoulders so that the energy put forward into throwing the upper cut could carry into the follow up punch.

Merdock who had been tripped by Joshua stumbled several steps before falling over. His own momentum carrying him forward in his fall. So that when he fell he fell hard. Joshua moved aside as his brother fell to the ground. Keeping an eye on Merdock as his brother picked himself up after having been tripped.

"Stay out of this brother." Warned Merdock as he got up on one knee and brushed the dirt off of himself.

"I am not doing anything. You are the ones attacking unprovoked."

As Jason talked to his brother, Markus follow up punch landed with a solid impact into Murdock's face. Hitting the Hobgoblin with all the strength Markus could muster. Not intending to hold back any at all. Ensuring his fist, arm and body followed through with the punch. Making the large Hobgoblin reel backwards from the hit. Not waiting for his opponent to recover, Markus reached forward with his right hand and with his left already on the Hobgoblins face used both hands to grab the back of his head. Pulling their face and head forwards and downwards. While also bringing his knee up to meet.

Markus drove his knee into Murdock's face crushing the others face on his knee. Landing not one not two strikes to the face, but three to his opponent before throwing him the rest of the way down to the ground and stepping back away from his opponent then turned his body and attention fully to Merdock who was now standing up fully now.

"Fucking Downer, you're going to regret messing with us." The other brother said before bringing his club up and swinging it downwards as he too charged Markus.

Showing his back to Jason, Merdock did not see as Jason gave his brother a shove. Unbalancing his brother and creating an opening for Markus. Which the human saw and took. Acting upon the opening created by his ally, Markus moved in, grabbed Merdock by the wrist that held the club. And threw his whole body into him before pushing upwards and rolling the hobgoblin forwards up and over him. Making the much bigger and heavier opponent land on the pavement with a heavy thud. With a twist Markus forced the hand that held the club to drop the weapon while also applying pressure to the arm and wrist to keep him stuck on his chest on the pavement.

“Enough! Don’t make me have to break your arm, yield!” Markus warned him.

“Fucking Downer,” Merdock growled and tried to pull his arm away and swing Markus off of him. But Markus held and applied more pressure moving the arm closer to the point of breaking.

“I won’t ask you again, yield!”

“Pissant!” Merdock growled in agitation and roared trying to once more get up.

With a grimace, Markus followed through on his warning and broke Merdock’s arm with a sickening cracking and snapping sound. Releasing the arm, Markus gave a large amount of space between himself and Merdock. Retreating several feet from the hobgoblin who now rolled around on the ground clutching his arm.

Markus stood there panting and watching. Waiting to see if either of the two brothers would stand back up and attack him. He was on edge. So when he felt someone place a hand on his shoulder he reacted on instinct. Attempting to grab the offending hand. But as soon as he made his move, the hand removed itself.

“Cool it, the fights over with.” Jason spoke as he now stood beside the human and looked over to his two brothers laying on the ground. One who was unconscious and likely had a broken nose and his other brother rolling on the ground, screaming in pain and rage.

“Sorry, always expecting another attack when I’m in a fight.”

“Well you weren’t alone in this one. So keep that in mind would you?”

“Right, thank you, Jason.” Markus said and took a deep breath to calm himself and to relax and to not focus on the fight anymore, he turned his attention to Jason. “I owe you for helping me out. It couldn’t have been easy for you to break that rule placed by your boss.”

“Consider it paying you back for assisting me with those kids and we’re even.”

Markus smiled and nodded his head in agreement. Then looked to the two brothers once more. There was a world of difference between the two brothers laying on the ground in front of him and the third brother standing beside him. The times he had fought the two brothers on his own, he had managed to come out on top, but not without considerable effort on his part. The few times he fought Jason, Jason always had backup forcing him to exert himself to just avoid the

fight entirely. He could handle one or two foes, but when faced with numbers, it was always better to get away from the fight.

“What are we going to do about your brothers?”

“What about them?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Nothing, they got themselves into this. And they’re hardy enough to pick themselves up eventually. Also I’ll send someone to come collect their asses if they take to long to get back to the boss and explain themselves.”

“Fair enough.” Markus nodded his head and looked back in the direction of the store where Isabella was at. He grimaced at the thought that she had just watched him beat two grown men rather than deescalate the fight. “Shit.”

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Isabella hummed happily to herself as she stood beside Ms. Janet. She was concerned about her father and the grumpy hobgoblin man he had trouble getting along with. But her senses told her that while the two were not close. That they would be okay. So she smiled, believing she had helped her daddy make a new friend.

While she waited for them to come back, she helped Ms. Janet take the bags that the grumpy man had purchased and put them away for safe keeping. So that he could collect them when he returned with daddy.

“You seem to be happier now.” Ms. Janet noted with a smile looking down to her.

“I got to help daddy make a new friend~!” She said happily, believing that if her father simply had more friends. That maybe he would worry less and be able to relax and be happy too.

The fox woman giggled and smiled to her response before turning her attention to another customer. A human woman this time with a large cart of groceries. “Say Isabella, think you could help me with bagging these, please?”

“Hmm?” Isabella looked to the counter and the items the woman was purchasing and nodded her head as she wanted to help as much as possible. “Of course~!” She said cheerfully and with some verbal assistance from Ms. Janet she managed to help put all the groceries away for the woman who thanked her before leaving.

As the woman left, Isabella continued to hum to herself bobbing herself side to side singing a happy tune she heard her mother sing from time to time. The words escaped her, but the tune had stuck. She was in a happy mood.

And then she heard Ms. Janet gasp.

Isabella looked up to the adult who was to be watching over her. And noticed that Ms. Janet was looking out the window of the store at something. Isabella also looked to the window but could not really see well from her spot so she went over to the window to see what was happening outside.

As she got to the window she saw her daddy and the grumpy man talking to two other people who did not look like nice people. And then the two people grabbed two things from their hips and charged at her father!

“Daddy!” She cried out in fear as she quickly slapped at the window. Her small hands harmlessly bouncing off the sturdy window. But she watched with fear as the fight broke out between her dad, the grumpy man and the two other men.

She watched with horror as the fight unfolded. While her father looked to be handling himself well with the grumpy man helping him. Seeing her father in the fight frightened her as she didn’t want him to get hurt or in trouble.

When they emerged victorious from the fight. Her dad and the grumpy man talked for a little bit about something before heading back to the store and her. She didn’t wait for her dad to fully enter the building before she rushed forward and hugged his legs tightly.

“Daddy!” She cried and hugged his legs tightly, sniffing she held on tightly to him. “I was so worried!”

“Hey, hey it’s okay. Daddy is fine.” He said reaching down to rub her back.

The grumpy man walked past them and went to talk to Ms. Janet, but she was more concerned for her father.

“You got into a fight! You could have gotten hurt!”

“I didn’t want to fight them dear. But those mean men are the type of people who don’t like to talk or discuss.”

“Then why didn’t you try to run away from them?”

“I couldn’t just leave you behind, now could I?” He said kneeling down and hugged her just as tightly. She sniffled and looked up to his face now that he was closer to her. She saw that while he was okay, he showed concern for her. Her lips trembled as he held her gaze. Some reason as she stared into his eyes she began to calm down and relax. A sense of safety returning to her.

“No,” She said shaking her head. She was still shaken by what had happened. But being near her father, she felt a sense of calmness return. “you would not leave me.”

“That’s right, I’m going to protect my daughter.” He said and let go of her to which she also let go of him. But she quickly grabbed his hand and held it tightly in her own. He took hers in return and squeezed her hand briefly.

“Jason, we’re going to head back home now. Thank you again for your help.”

The grumpy man looked over to her father and shook his head. “I would advise against it Markus.” In a serious tone and using her fathers name for the first time she had heard them talk to one another.

For whatever reason, when he said this. Her dads face also turned serious as he seemed to realize something. Something that escaped Isabella.

“Daddy?”

He shook his head as Isabella spoke to him with concern. “I need to go back. There are somethings there we need to get.”

“Then I will come with you. If only to make sure your little one doesn’t get involved in any of your crap.”

Her fathers smile seemed different as this time his smile seemed more sad.

“Daddy? Is everything alright?”

“Don’t worry darling.” He said his smile and mood lightening up as he looked to her and squeezed her hand. “We may have to make another trip to Lance’s again, far sooner than expected.”

She still didn’t understand what was going on. But she at least knew what they were doing now.

“Okay, I’ll accept your help Jason. No matter what happens, Isabella cannot be hurt.”

“Good, then lets be off. The faster we get you off the streets the better.” The grumpy man said and joined them. “Oh, Ms. Janet? Can you please have my items delivered to my place please? I’ll make sure to pay extra for delivery.”

“Of course. Thank you again, please be safe.”

“We will.” Both Isabella’s father and Jason said together as they left the grocery store and headed back to the apartment building together in relative silence.

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When they got back to the apartment, there was a small crowd of people gathered just outside and a police car. Standing next to the police car was a familiar Lizardman that Isabella had talked with before who had been nice to her and brought her to her father.

The lizardman seemed to be disturbed, bothered even and his whole-body posture meant he was on alert and looking for something. While she could not see the big Minotaur person who had been with him. Isabella got a feeling something bad had happened. Making her shrink and hide behind her father and stay as close to him as possible.

The lizardman police officer soon spotted both Markus, Jason and Isabella and walked over to them.

“Can I help you officer?” Markus asked calmly to the clearly nervous and edgy police officer.

“Where have you been?”

“I went to talk to a friend in getting a position at their store and assistance in filing for food assistance.” Markus told him, giving him his story.

The Lizardman looked to her father with a stern look before looking to Jason and taking a second look at the hobgoblin.

“Are you his friend?”

“I am an acquaintance of his. We’ve dealt with each other a couple times in the past. We met at the store and I was just heading this way with him.” Jason added to the story.

Both of them spoke in a calm manner to the Lizardman who seemed to consider their story. But noticing that Isabella was holding Markus’s hand and sticking close to him. He nodded his head and gave a sigh of relief.

“Sir, I regret to inform you that there was a break in in your apartment. I am sorry but you cannot go inside right now. My partner is still taking notes and will be out here in a few moments. He will likely want to take a report from you as to what you were doing, before making a report to headquarters.”

Markus nodded his head in understanding. “Okay, I’ll be happy to answer his questions.”

Together they stood close to the police car while waiting for the Minotaur to return. They did not have long to wait before the large Minotaur man joined them. Upon seeing his partner standing beside Isabella, Jason and Markus, he gave an approving nod to his partner.

“Evening sir, as I am sure my partner has told you your apartment was broken into. I’ve concluded my initial investigation and will be making a report to headquarters shortly. Do you have a minute to tell me what you were doing when the incident happened?”

Markus nodded his head, yes. "I do. But is it possible for me to go inside? I need to grab a few things. Mostly just my daughter's things."

The Minotaur looked back in the direction of the apartment and then back to Markus. "I would advise against doing so, sir. It is not a pretty sight. And it is a crime scene so we cannot just let you take just anything. There are certain items that have been, affected and will need to be collected by investigative teams. In order to track down the perpetrators."

"I see. Well it can't be helped. But I will try not to disturb to much. And I will check with you before taking anything out of the apartment. But I will need to grab something for my daughter." Markus argued.

"Listen, we cant just let you enter the crime scene." The Lizardman added backing up his partner. "But, if you only take the essential items, then I'll write up the additional report explaining why we let you take them."

The Minotaur raised an eyebrow to his partner but did not stop him or interrupt him. Letting him speak.

"Thank you," Markus said with an appreciative nod of understanding. "But I believe I owe you a report?" Markus said taking a step to the Minotaur.

"Yes, could you please have a seat inside the car, sir? It will be easier to write the report and send it."

Markus looked at the car and the Minotaur, he didn't trust the police. But so far the Minotaur had proved to be somewhat trustworthy. Markus did as asked and sat in the police car with him. Giving him the same story he had told his partner. Knowing that they would both compare notes to see if he had been lying. Once he had given him his story the Minotaur thanked him and let him leave the vehicle while he filed the report.

Once out of the car he looked to the Lizardman with an inquisitive look. "Can I?"

"Yes, you may. But I advise against taking your daughter in there. And leave her here with us."

Markus looked to Jason, the Lizardman officer and the Minotaur who finished submitting the report and was exiting the car. "Alright, look over her for me, please. It won't be but a moment."

Jason nodded his head, yes. The Lizardman also gave an approving nod.

"This way follow me. I will give you five minutes to go in and grab a few essential items and then I will have to ask you to leave." The Minotaur said escorting Markus back to his apartment.

When he got there, he could tell just from the way the door was laying on the ground busted off of its hinges that whoever had come knocking. Was definitely not in the mood for talking, so it

was a good thing he had taken Isabella with him to go see Gal'Brek when he did. The Minotaur waited outside for him and gave him a nod to enter his apartment.

Upon entering the apartment itself. The first thing to grab his attention was all the graffiti and writing upon the walls. Much of it special and racial slurs and insults. Minor petty things which he could ignore even much more personal insults focused on him. Walking around the main area of his apartment, the couch was little more than exploded cushions and torn up cloth and wood. The blanket he had been using was trashed and ruined. The pile of bills he had been gathering were all opened and scattered around. They may have learned some of his finances, but nothing a visit to the regional governance office could not at least get a ball rolling on fixing. Then there was the kitchen, all the food, plates anything and everything were just discarded everywhere. Wasted not even the least bit of effort to try and steal the food. Just taken out trashed and ruined for no purpose but spite.

He headed further in, to his own bedroom which he had given to Isabella. It was here things began to turn from the expected trashing. To the most heinous of debased debauchery possible. He couldn't give a damn about his own personal items. His stuff was all secondhand possessions which he got from the trash bins of stores tossing out old clothes and the few odds and ends he had managed to hold on to. But held no real sentimental value to him beyond a few painful memories that would best be forgotten.

No it was when he saw that the new clothes he had gotten his daughter which had been taken out and ruined did he get mad. As each article of clothing was ruined in some manner or way. From being torn to shreds to in certain cases. Being used as a rag for certain 'uses' and were covered in a sticky liquid he could only guess to that made his stomach turn. If he found out the perpetrator, but the real icing on the cake to the destruction of his daughter's belongings. Was the purposeful decapitation of her stuffed bunny. With its head being mostly torn off and held on by a couple of threads. But for the doll itself it was filled with more of that same sticky substance which left no illusion as to what the stuff doll was used for.

Markus was familiar with how disgusting the underworld could be. He had had enough dealings and business with some of the most evil men and women in charge of the degenerates which made up the vast network of criminal enterprises. But there was always at least some sense of pride among the various criminal organizations. Or some code of honor. That while might not mean much or be much. Meant that business could be conducted with them to some extent.

There were still those within the disgusting underbelly of the city whom even Markus refused to deal with. People whom made even the worst offenders that Markus had worked with in the past seem like good people. And to think there might be one of these kinds of people, now working with or lurking among the numbers of the multitudes of criminal organizations arrayed against him. Made Markus's blood turn cold.

He was enraged, but he stayed calm. He would find the sick person who had defiled his daughter's possessions in such a manner. And ensure their filth was excised properly.

Regretfully there was nothing he could recover. Not even those books his daughter had borrowed from the library had made it out of this in one piece. There was nothing good about this situation. And now he was just filled with a cold burning anger.

Leaving the apartment, he returned to the minotaur empty handed. “There was nothing I could find that was salvageable. Whoever did this was intending to do more than insult and intimidate. They went out of their way to, fornicate and pleasure themselves with my daughters things.” As he spoke his fists tightened until his knuckles were white.

“As I said earlier, it is not a pretty sight. Do you have a place where you two can stay? Somewhere safe where the perpetrators will not be able trouble you?” The Minotaur asked escorting him away from the scene and back to the car.

“I do, a pair of old friends of mine. They’ll be willing to take us in until I can find another place to stay.”

“Due to the events of today. And the necessity of needing to find a suitable new place to stay. I’ll put in a request to the CPS to delay their inspection. Or to make an exception during their first visit. Though ultimately what they do is up to them.” The Lizardman added once the pair came closer to the car.

“Thank you,” Markus said with genuine surprise, not expecting the Lizardman to be so generous considering his tone towards him in their first encounter.

“Again, that will be up to CPS. We can only make a suggestion to them. For now, I suggest you take your daughter and head to your friends house and stay there.” The Minotaur reminded him.

“Alright, we will do that.”

“Be safe and remember if you need assistance the emergency report system is always active.”

With that, both the Minotaur and Lizardman got back into the police car and drove away. Leaving Markus, Jason and Isabella alone. Isabella had a look of sadness to her, likely still upset from seeing him fight earlier and now learning she could not stay in her second home, his home anymore because of events outside her control. Were all starting to take their toll on the young Lamia.

“So are these ‘friends’ anyone I might know of?” Jason asked crossing his arms as Markus quietly took Isabella’s hand and began to take the lead to the bus stop.

“No, these friends are from long before I met your family. Come on Isabella, we’re going to be staying with Lance and Cindy for a little bit.” He said which seemed to cheer up the young Lamia a little bit. The thought of food at least seemed to be a means of cheering up the little girl. But even Markus knew food was but a temporary means of assuaging the fears the girl had.

And he was going to make her worry more soon enough.

The bus trip to Lance's house was quiet and both Jason and Markus kept their eyes on alert for anyone who might be following them. Luckily it seemed they were not allowing them a means to quietly make their way to Lance's apartment without any further difficulties, beyond explaining the situation of things to both Lance and Cindy. Although Jason elected to stay outside and wait while Markus spoke with his friends.

"When you're done talking with them. Come talk with me outside." Jason had told him and left Markus to enter the apartment while he stood outside and stood watch.

With a silent nod of understanding, Markus entered the apartment though as he did Isabella dejectedly let go of his hand. After hearing from him why they needed to stay with Lance and Cindy. On top of everything else that had happened in such a short span of time, she was most definitely feeling overwhelmed and helpless to do anything about it. His heart broke for her, but he steeled himself with resolve to right these wrongs and provide the stability which he had promised but was stolen away by others.

Cindy went with Isabella to talk to the lamia alone to try and comfort her as best she could. Meaning Lance and Markus were left to talk to each other.

"So, what is the plan?" Lance asked first once Isabella and Cindy were out of ear shot.

"Find out who decided to break into my home. Learn what I can about them, give them a choice. Then depending on their decision, I go to work."

Lance visibly winced. "Markus, I thought you said you were clean. You had gotten out of the business. It is why Cindy is willing to give you a second chance."

"I was out. I was clean. Whoever they are, involved my daughter however indirectly. I will not let them go so easily."

"Do you really think it will be so easy? That you can just stick your foot back in and get yourself out and not get dragged back into it all again?" There was a clear tone of disappointment.

"Of course not! But what they did, what they implied,"

"Are the actions of a sick animal, Markus."

"And animals get put down."

"Jesus, it's like I'm talking to a damned wall. I know how stubborn you are. But use your head and think this through properly. Or else I'll throw you out on your ass and call the police and CPS for child endangerment."

Markus stared at his friend with surprise and also anger. But the threat did get through to him.

“Then what am I supposed to do?!” Markus shouted his frustration breaking through.

“Think, use your head. You’re smart Markus. Think things through. Don’t act on your emotions. Don’t let yourself be drawn back into something you’ve worked so hard to separate yourself from. There was a reason me and Cindy worked with you as we did or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten. You two were amazing and you had helped me out a lot back then.” He would shake his head no he had not forgotten.

“Then take my advice. Stop and think for a moment. Your daughter is in the room over. Most likely crying over the loss of her possessions and the feeling of safety and stability presented by having a place to call home. As well as seeing you get into a fight, whether you wanted to or not. Even you have to realize she is but a little girl. Who is holding on to whatever she can hold on to. That includes you or were those words you spouted when you came back to my house the other day to get back in my wife’s good graces just empty promises?”

Markus did not feel like he had been slapped. But the effect of Lance’s words had a similar affect to a slap across the face.

“No, I meant it. I want to give her a safe and stable life. A life I am willing to do anything to provide for her.”

“So will acting brashly as you were just suggesting a moment ago provide that safety and stability?”

“No,” Markus shook his head. “no it would not. It would just rip away what was left and I would lose her in the process of trying to fight for what I wanted to give her.”

He paused and took a deep breath. Leaning back into the large soft couch and exhaled his breath as he stared up at the ceiling. His mind now silently racing. What could he do? The most obvious answer was to do nothing. But that made no sense and it left a sick animal on the loose to haunt the streets. He was not some dark avenger of the night dispensing ‘justice’ upon criminals, a vigilante he was not. Though such an idea was but a fun distraction for but a moment before he banished it from his mind.

He was more the type to take his time studying his target planning out his strike and then removing his target with surgical precision and impunity. It was why he had trouble fighting large groups of people on his own. But why he was so effective in taking down singular targets or a small handful of targets. With the little information he had now. There was very little he could use or act on.

“So what should I do?” He would ask of his friend and looked to Lance.

“Are the police already involved?”

“Yes?”

“Then let them do their job. While you do what you can to clear your debt and find a safe place for you and your daughter. You and your daughter are welcome to stay with me and Cindy. Though she will add the stipulation that whatever work you do. Doesn’t follow you back to us. And I will full heartedly agree with and support her on that.”

As much as it bothered Markus to not chase down the animal who had indirectly threatened or implied doing terrible things to Isabella. Lance had made clear the point he was making earlier. And now that he had time to cool off and talk to someone else who he trusted. His thoughts were clearing some and rationalization returned to him.

“Thank you, Lance. I’ve still got a lot to learn it seems when it comes to being a father.”

“Hey, life is just one long lesson. If you aren’t learning something new, then you are doing something wrong. Besides, who is ready to be a parent?”

“Are you ready to be a parent?”

It was Lance’s turn to shake his head and sigh.

“To be up front with you? It terrifies me. I remember how much of a little shit I was when I was a kid and how much trouble I gave my parents.” He paused and smiled. “Although, if you can manage to be a good enough father for Isabella. Then I think I can manage as well.”

“Dear, if you’re going to set yourself a bar. At least don’t set it at floor level.” Cindy commented as she joined the two men.

“You wound me Cindy.” Markus laughed briefly. “How is she doing?”

“She is scared from the break in. But I think that is less the reason for her current state, than it was seeing you in a fight and being in danger.” She said and sat beside Lance.

“I thought as much.” Markus said with regret in his voice. “I would have preferred to have not fought them but,”

“It was an unavoidable fight. I know, from what I understand from your story. Those two were looking for a reason to fight somebody. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Cindy said finishing for him.

“Right, and then immediately after that fight, finding out our home had been broken into. I’ve not had a chance to properly talk to her.”

“Well, now is the time to do so. I’ve calmed her down. And I think talking with her father would do wonders for her. Then talking to a person she doesn’t even know.”

Markus nodded his head in agreement with her and stood up. "Thank you again, both of you." He said and went to go talk to Isabella.

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She was saddened by all that had happened that day. Sure she had got a chance to talk to one of her dad's friends and even got to help her dad make a new friend with someone he didn't get along with. But she was still shaken from seeing him get into that fight.

Her mother had long since taught her to avoid fighting. That fighting never solved anything and often caused more trouble and problems than they solved. She was taught that if she were to find herself in a situation where someone was looking to fight. She was to avoid that person at all costs. That she was to keep trying to find a way to talk and discuss with the other person. To try and calm them down and come to an understanding to where she and the other person could coexist peacefully, and no one would have to fight.

Yet, her father did not do as her mother had told her to do. I was making her question whether or not her mother was wrong or was her father wrong? She didn't know and when she asked him why he fought instead of running away. He reminded her that he could not abandon her and that he was going to protect her. So that added to her worry. Was her not being a fighter adding to his reasoning or purpose to fight? Instead of leaving the area and not fighting those mean men?

And then when they went home, they could not go home. As someone had broken into their home. So even if she wanted to go somewhere safe. She was shown that the one place that she thought was safe was not safe. What was she to do? Where was she to go if there was a fight about to happen? She believed that her home would always be this safe place to come back to that no one would ever disturb. Yet that belief was ruined and now her worries were threatening to bubble over once more.

Tears entered her eyes as she hugged her tail to her chest and sniffled softly. Wrapping her tail around herself as she dearly wanted to be back with her mom, to have her dad with them. To not have to worry about mean men and people fighting.

"Isabella?" She heard her dad's voice as he opened the door to the room she was borrowing from the nice lady.

"Daddy?"

"Is everything okay?" He asked walking in and sitting beside her, wrapping an arm around her to hold her and pull her in close.

As he did so, she began to unwind from around herself. And wrap her tail around herself and her dad as she hugged him and put her face into his side. She shook her head, no to answer his question. "No."

"Can you tell me what's wrong?"

“Why did you fight?”

“Because I couldn’t leave you alone. I would never abandon you.”

“But momma always said I should avoid any fights and that I should run away from a fight. To try and find a way to talk to people and come to understand one another. So we wouldn’t have to fight.”

He smiled and hugged her tightly.

“That sounds like your mother. She believed in the good of all people. And that there was always a way to come to an understanding. So that everyone could live together. That is a good ideal to live by, to always seek to talk and come to an understanding, rather than to seek out a fight.”

“But then why did you fight?”

As she asked him again why he fought, it appeared as if he realized what she was actually asking.

“I fight, because there are things worth fighting for. Things which I feel are worth taking the risks that come with fighting another person. Sometimes those things are people or ideas in which I believe should be protected which might need protection from those who might harm those people or silence those ideas.” As he said that he kissed the top of her head.

“You are one such example, I am willing to fight to protect you. To make sure that you can live a life without ever needing to fight.”

“But I don’t want you to fight!”

He smiled and held her tightly.

“I will do my best to avoid fighting. I do not like to fight,” he told her and caught himself from saying more. As there was clearly more, he could have said. “but I will only fight if all other options have been exhausted.”

That would have to do for now. It did not make her happy. But at least she knew a little about why her dad would fight.

“Should I fight?”

That gave him pause to think.

“What do you mean?”

“Should I fight like you? Or should I not fight like mom?”

Her father's face gained a pained expression. As there was clearly some inner turmoil going on within his mind at her question.

“That is a question we all must find an answer for ourselves. As for whether or not you should fight right now? No, you should not. You should be following your mom's words. Talking with people and making new friends and coming to understand the people you meet. That way you can understand those around you. So that way you can answer that question for yourself, whether you should fight or not.”

As he told her this, she looked up to him as she had many times before. Once more she felt like he was trying to impart some lesson to her. Giving her an answer but not fully giving her the entire answer. Unlike when she lived with her mother who would tell her everything she needed to know. Her father would only tell her bits and pieces, to let her come to the answer she needed on her own. She didn't know just how to feel about his method. But she wished he would just tell her instead of letting her come to an answer on her own.

He seemed to sense that there was still some confusion within her and he hugged her tightly to him.

“Young girls and boys your age should not be fighting. You should be having fun, laughing, playing and making new friends your age. Fighting should be the last thing on your mind. And,” he sighed dipping his head as regret entered his voice. “I know I've not given you many opportunities to make new friends with kids your age. But I promise you will get a chance soon.”

“But I am happy being with you and your friends.”

“That's good to hear. But you should have some friends of your own. Friends who you can play with and get to know and talk to.”

“But I can talk to you and your friends.”

Markus smiled to her though there looked to be a bit of a pained expression as he tried to think about something.

“Well, you will still need to learn to talk to kids your age. How else can you learn and grow if you don't talk to other kids your age? Or learn to play and get along with them?”

“Do I need to?” She asked fidgeting around a little.

“Is there a reason you do not want to make friends with other children your age?”

“I..” She looked away in embarrassment and more than a little bit of fear. “I never made any friends. Not with anyone who wasn't a relative. And most of them were mean to me. The few who were nice to me were nice because their parents told them to be nice.”

“Are you afraid other kids will be mean to you as well?”

She nodded her head, yes.

“Well, that is a thing when it comes to making new friends. And talking to new people you do not know. Chances are you will come across a few who for whatever reason will not be nice to you. But you will never know who does or doesn't like you if you do not talk to them.” He smiled. “And your mom did tell you to talk to people, didn't she? How can you learn to get along with people who don't like you if you do not make an effort to try and talk to them?”

“But what if they are so mean they try to start a fight?”

“Then you leave them alone and if they follow after you you look for help.”

“What if I am scared to talk to them? Or say something to upset them?”

“Well if you say something upsetting, then you will just have to apologize and learn. As for being scared, the only way to not be scared is to talk to people. It is scary at first. But once you get over your initial fear, you might just find that you enjoy talking to new people.”

This was more the answer she was looking for and it showed on her face as she started to smile a little more.

“Say do you remember that park I told you about earlier? That I asked if you wanted to visit?”

“Yes?”

“Would you like to go there one day soon? And try to make some new friends on your own?”

“Maybe? Will you be there?”

“Of course, I will be. I wouldn't just leave you alone amongst a bunch of strangers I do not know.”

“Then I would like to go visit the park one day.”

This seemed to please him a lot as he smiled and ruffled her hair. “That's a good girl. Do you feel like coming out of this room?”

She nodded her head and unwrapped her tail from around him as she got off the bed while he stood up.

“Good, come on lets go check with Lance and Cindy.”

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After rejoining with the couple, with Isabella beside him. Markus spent time just talking with the two. With Isabella listening and speaking up occasionally. It seemed like a normal family moment. But he remembered that there was someone outside waiting for him. So he excused himself and went to talk to Jason.

Jason was waiting outside the apartment complex and nodded his head as he finally saw Markus approach.

“Took you long enough. How’s the little one?”

“Shaken, but she is like her mother. She will recover quickly.”

“That’s good, now to business.”

“Right business, you said you wanted to talk to me? I take it this talk is somehow related to the debt I owe your boss?”

“Yes and I intend to collect on it. Whether you talk to her or not.”

“I’ve told you I don’t have the cash.” Markus said crossing his arms.

“Then you don’t have the luxury of turning down this job offer now do you?”

“So black mail? Is that your angle?”

“No, but if I must I will.”

“So then out with it.”

“My brothers have gotten out of hand.”

“I don’t do assassinations.”

“I’m not asking you to kill them, Jesus fuck! Do you really need to live up to being a god damn monster? I want you to help me get rid of them. Use whatever connections you got with the police to lock them up for a long time. Long enough so that we can rebuild and expand without them constantly dragging us into another fight or another turf war.”

“I don’t have any connection to the police.”

“Bullshit, you clearly do. Police don’t respond that quickly to a break in. Or show that much preference or leeway to anyone but their own or those with pull. And you cannot deny that they have not shown you preference. Not when I just watched them let you enter a crime scene as they just did.”

Markus had to admit that was odd. Even for the police. They had never been that quick to react to anything. Only showing up after the event had happened so as to write up a report and supposedly look for the perpetrator.

“Maybe there is some connection. I don’t know how or why they are connected to me. And have no idea how to get in touch with them.”

“Well then you will have to figure that out. What’s important is helping me get my brothers off the streets and out of mine and the boss’s hair.”

“So black mail, but not black mailing me. Just looking for dirt to get rid of your brothers.”

“Sure, fine, whatever, look they have caused enough damage. And since you just kicked their ass they will be looking to stir up more trouble. I need you to help me before they stir up the rest of the boys and go out looking for trouble that will surely ruin us.”

“It won’t be easy.” Markus said getting an idea of what they would need to do to accomplish Jason’s goal.

“Nothing ever is and if it were easy it would be a god damn trap.”

“So any leads on where to look?”

“I’ve no idea. But if you were to show up and talk to the boss. I’m sure you could find some leads. On top of whatever other job she might have for you, which you can use as cover to find a means to get rid of them.”

“Don’t you think this is highly dangerous and downright dirty? If your boss learns of this. You will be kicked out and treated as a traitor.”

“I know, but that’s why I am employing you. You help me get rid of my brothers. I’ll help you pay off your debt. Plus you get whatever the boss gives you for helping her out.”

Markus gave the hobgoblin a long hard look. “Let me think about it. I will need to talk to my daughter and tell her I am helping a... friend. I should be by the shop in the next day or so.”

“Don’t think to long. Give my brothers to much time and they will make a mess. And if they make a mess for me to clean up, I will make a mess of you.”

“I promise it won’t take that long, but I get the message.”

“Good, then I will see you later.”

“Talk to you later, Jason.” Markus said and with that the two men went their separate ways.